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Review of *Ghost Settlement on the Prairie: A Biography of Thurman, Kansas* By Joseph V. Hickey

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Ghost Settlement on the Prairie: A Biography of Thurman, Kansas. By Joseph V. Hickey. Foreword by William Least Heat-Moon. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995. Maps, photographs, notes, index. xxii + 320 pp. \$27.50.

To label a book as local history is often to discredit it as solid scholarship. No one should make this mistake in the case of Joseph Hickey's fine study of a tiny settlement in the Flint Hills of Kansas. Hickey, in fact, displays here a remarkable combination of deep local knowledge and theoretical underpinnings. His work sheds important light on what William Least Heat-Moon has called "the perils of excessive individualism," that most American of processes in which community life is gradually undermined by the forces of large-scale capitalism. Concurrently, Hickey also provides critical new information on the evolution of the Flint Hills tradition of extensive cattle grazing and absentee ownership. His account is the best available on that subject.

The book is standard in format: nine chapters organized chronologically plus an introduction that describes the local physical environment and the organizational concepts of entrepreneurship and social capital (the latter borrowed largely from the work of John Bennett). Chapter two, on the Kansa Indians, is interesting in its own right but not particularly relevant to the main Thurman story.

Hickey argues convincingly that "settlements" contained a large potential for the sharing of skills and other social interaction because of their noncapitalistic origins and relatively homogeneous populations. With the

aid of key informant Ray Johnson and after seemingly endless hours spent with old newspapers, deed books, tax rolls, census files, and interviews, Hickey makes this past cultural world come to life. He explores the details of everyday existence—why a school was located here and not there, why a store was established in this particular year—and smoothly fits the results into larger social structures. Throughout, he treats the Thurman people with respect.

Hickey identifies the advent of Rural Free Delivery as a key to the decline of the community. It cost farmers their primary social center, and with no more local post office the general store closed as well. Churches followed soon after. As for the dominance of grazing in the region, this apparently stems from the early absence of a herd law. Upland farmers went elsewhere and speculators got initial control of the acreage. Thurmanites and other valley farmers also lacked the resources to invest during the height of the western cattle boom in the 1870s and 1880s. More outsiders came in, and the local people could not compete. Some left and the rest were absorbed into the big ranching regimes.

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